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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000609

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR S GROFF, D NASSIRY, E BURKE AND F REID

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MAIN OPPOSITION PARTY KICKS OFF NEW
INTERNET CAMPAIGN

REF: A) COLOMBO 523 B) COLOMBO 446 C) COLOMBO 451

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe met Ambassador on April 23 to outline the UNP's latest efforts (ref a) to push the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) on human rights and media freedom. On April 22, the UNP launched a new website, www.unp.lk, which will serve as a forum for Sri Lankans to post "e-papers" that might not otherwise be published for fear of government retaliation. The UNP will also kick off an international lobbying campaign aimed at bringing worldwide attention to human rights and press freedom problems in Sri Lanka. Another component of the campaign will be the release of two reports documenting the government's alleged abuses. These efforts are the UNP's most recent attempts to re-energize the party in the wake of the demoralizing January "crossovers" to the governing coalition. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador met UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on April 23 at Wickremesinghe's request. Wickremesinghe outlined the UNP's latest efforts to push the GSL on human rights and media freedom. Wickremesinghe joked that the Ambassador has only a couple of weeks "left in the limelight" before all attention will turn to the UNP. The overall objective of this "agitation effort", he said, is to prevent the erosion of democracy in Sri Lanka, push the GSL to improve its record on human rights, and encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict. He said if the government were to arrest him, that would actually be the "best thing that could happen," but added he does not take rumors in the press to that effect seriously.

New Website

¶3. (C) On April 22, the UNP launched a new website, www.unp.lk, which will serve as a forum for Sri Lankans to post "e-papers." Wickremesinghe explained that many analysts

and journalists are reluctant to publish papers or articles that are critical of the government because of safety concerns. The new website will give these authors a safe place to post their views anonymously.

International Lobbying Campaign

¶4. (C) The UNP will also kick off an international lobbying campaign aimed at bringing worldwide attention to human rights and press freedom problems in Sri Lanka. UNP member of Parliament from Colombo Ravi Karunanayake will lead the lobbying effort and plans to start his travels in the next couple of weeks. Wickremesinghe is headed to the International Democratic Union meeting in Dubrovnik on April 25 to compare notes with other opposition groups. This lobbying campaign will be the focus of the UNP over the next few months, he said.

Controversial Reports

¶5. (C) Another component of the campaign will be the release of two reports documenting the government's alleged abuses. The first is an International Press Institute report on media freedom in Sri Lanka. The UNP plans to hold a ceremonial emailing event later this week to distribute and bring attention to the report, which includes several recommendations on how the GSL can improve media freedom. A second, UNP-drafted report will be released in couple of weeks on "threats to democracy in Sri Lanka." This report will cover a broader range of issues, and according to

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Wickremesinghe, will make the President "explode."

GSL Not Serious About Peace

¶6. (C) Ambassador asked Wickremesinghe for his views on the GSL's efforts to develop a political proposal to resolve the conflict. Wickremesinghe said that the GSL is not serious about the All Parties Representative Committee process and doubts that a legitimate proposal will emerge. In his opinion, the GSL is using the APRC process to play for time while it trains additional troops for its military offensive. Ambassador encouraged Wickremesinghe to support the government on a political solution if a serious proposal does emerge.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The UNP's new confrontational approach carries some risk. The government has taken some early steps against one of the most vocal UNP Members of Parliament, Johnston Fernando (ref b), alleging that he had not returned some office equipment and furniture from his time as a Minister in the previous UNP government. The charges are reminiscent of the equally inconsequential allegations against the SLFP dissident Sripathi Sooriyarachchi, who has been incarcerated since March 17 (ref c). These efforts represent the UNP's most recent attempt to re-energize the party in the wake of the demoralizing "crossovers" of key UNP parliamentarians to the government side in January. Wickremesinghe's new eagerness to make waves by taking the government to task publicly is a significant departure from his usual diffident style. It may help him to retain some of the party's base, which had been chafing at the restraint he had shown until recently. There will be some in his party who will want him to attack any devolution proposal coming from the President's SLFP, regardless of its merits. However, Ranil has promised us several times that he will put his country's interest above his party's -- if and when the SLFP puts forward a viable proposal.

BLAKE